

## TORTURE AND THE AMERICAN SOUL

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One thing that has gone *right* in the war in Iraq has been various disclosures of torture and sadism by American troops against Iraqi prisoners. We must never rationalize or condone such acts. We must not, as Pres. Bush did when the Abu Ghraib prison scandal was first revealed, claim that “they do not represent the America that I know.” We must not, as Sec. Rumsfeld did, label them as “fundamentally un-American” and something our troops would not do. Such rhetorical ploys only shift blame from higher officials and the cause itself to the ordinary American servicemen and women on the front lines who did the deeds. And we must not, as Bush and Cheney have been doing for months, justify torture as a means for extracting valuable information. Experience from history and from many wars demonstrates that torture strengthens, not weakens, both individual and collective resistance. And it has no rational or humane justification.

It is right that atrocities are exposed in war. Only months passed from the time of the Abu Ghraib prison abuse until it was reported to the world. During the Vietnam War, the My Lai massacre did not rock the country until we were in that war, officially, for seven years. A full year had passed before the atrocity was exposed. The No Gun Ri massacre that occurred during the Korean War was only revealed by groundbreaking journalism at the beginning of this millennium, half a century after it occurred. Edward Bloch, an 80 year old veteran and marine platoon leader in the Pacific during World War II, declares that he will not die in peace until he is able, against official resistance, to document and get into the history books the massacre of a village he participated in in cooperation with defeated Japanese troops on mainland China after his war's end. It is necessary for the ultimate health and safety of the troops on the front lines and the civilization at home that whenever there is war, atrocities are exposed as early and often as possible.

This is not to condemn soldiers who commit them. Military law states that it is ultimately each soldier's duty to differentiate those orders that might be criminal and unduly inhumane from normal military orders that must be obeyed. GIs are responsible for their actions and must be accountable. But we must not demonize them, as Mr. Bush did, as aberrations. Most of the offenders at Abu Ghraib were ordinary Americans, not sadists or psychopaths. Rather, the occurrence of atrocities during wartime force us to try to confront what any of us, our neighbors or our children, can become and do, and that certain conditions will bring out the worst of our society and human nature.

Psychological research shows that only about 2% of the American population are psychopaths or have psychopathic tendencies. These tendencies attract some people to the military where they may do well if they receive enough structure and authoritative guidance. But their destructive tendencies can be unleashed without restraint or remorse

in combat and other social conditions produced in a war environment. It is unlikely that torture is only perpetrated by a gathering of that 2%. If so, we would have to ask how and why they gathered, and take measures to ensure that military planners do not group soldiers with psychopathic tendencies in the same unit. More realistically, we must assume that, in this Iraq War as in wars of the past, most service people who have stripped, beaten, molested, raped, humiliated, tied and killed prisoners were ordinary people who became extraordinarily distorted. What drives people to such acts?

Examining these questions about Viet Nam veterans during that war, psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, author of *Home From the War*, first coined the phrase “atrocious producing situation.” When fear, threat, violence suffered and given, loss, proximity of death, moral confusion, alienation, disbelief, immersion in horror, power and control over others, sheer exhaustion of body, mind, and spirit all coincide long enough, and when the enemy has been steadily and sufficiently dehumanized ( the “gooks” of Viet Nam are the “towelheads” now), then we are in an atrocious-producing situation. Only extraordinary people resist and it can take extraordinary means. One GI shot himself in the foot so that he wouldn’t participate in the killings at My Lai. In both the Viet Nam and Iraq Wars, GIs who reported these tortures were concerned about retaliations against them but decided on higher moral actions than “following orders” and keeping silent. But many ordinarily decent people will succumb to the level of the environmental conditions surrounding them. They may act out the ugliest, most sadistic dimensions of what depth psychologists call the human shadow. Most of us, when conditions force it, can become uncivilized and can humiliate, shame, abuse and destroy. Some of us, when conditions allow it, may take these emotions of war and the beast within to intolerable extremes.

When nations behave as colonial powers, Philip Kennicott wrote in the *Washington Post* when the Abu Ghraib prison scandal was first exposed in 2002, demeaning occupied people, insulting their traditions, humiliating them, it is “not surprising... unexceptional;” atrocious is the inevitable extension of colonialism. And when soldiers do not believe in what they are asked to do, when they are not sure that killing is justified or that its cause is morally incontrovertible, when they cannot bolster themselves with supreme principles against their destruction of farms and villages, cities and holy sites, and against maiming and killing helpless civilians along with enemy combatants, then we will inevitably see atrocious. It was perpetrated by the Dutch in Indonesia, the Belgians in the Congo, by the Turks against the Armenians, the Japanese and Germans before and during World War II. It was perpetrated by the French in Indochina and Algeria, by Russians in Afghanistan, by Israelis and Palestinians against each other, by Americans against Native Americans, and in Korea, Viet Nam, and now in Iraq. “What you do, you become,” wrote Viet Nam veteran Gustav Hasford in *The Short Times*, his novel of jungle combat. When the character Kurtz, in both Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness* and Coppola’s Vietnam War movie *Apocalypse Now*, muttered “The horror, the horror,” he was not looking at the war around him but within. Wars inevitably produce atrocious because soldiers steeped in horror for a long enough period of time will finally become that horror.

American leaders, in their early responses to the disclosure of torture, used denial and the marginalizing and blaming of individuals. As Kennicott wrote regarding Abu Ghraib, “The problem isn’t the abuse of the prisoners... we’re not really like that. The problem is our reputation. Our soldier’s reputations. Our national self-image. These

photos, we insist, are not us.” In the debate over the continued use of torture and the leadership’s resistance to Sen. McCain’s proposed law banning torture, Bush administration officials have been using rationalization and justification. Torture, claim Cheney and Rumsfeld, furthers our cause by providing valuable information. These leaders, by and large, express concern not with the unjust sufferings of our victimized prisoners, but with furthering their own agenda and shaping the image of our nation and our soldiers around the world. Sen. McCain has been concerned about America’s loss of moral prestige in the eyes of the world. On Bush’s final tentative agreement to support his proposed ban on torture, he said, “We’ve sent a message to the world that the United States is not like the terrorists... What we are is a nation that upholds values and standards...” Pres. Bush and his associates never seem to grasp that all that has gone wrong in this war and in the world’s opinion of our nation are direct consequences of this war. Soulless leadership anguishes over the marketplace image that creates publicity and influence, not the genuine suffering and injustice behind it.

It is not true that atrocities and torture are “un-American” or inconsistent with American values. Rather, such acts show shadow aspects of this war and our soldiers’ beliefs about its morality and justification. They demonstrate the moral confusion and deterioration of our troops in the combat zone and about their mission and purpose. They show the worst side of us as Americans and human beings under conditions that encourage the worst to triumph over the best in the human spirit. That is the kind of war we’ve created. That is what can happen to our children when we send them off to this kind of war. And what happens to our children, and how they will suffer for the rest of their lives, may be the best index we have for the true spirit of this war.